

**AB-50 - Paper**

**SUPPORTING ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE UK ARMED FORCES -  
A SOFT SYSTEMS APPROACH**

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**Introduction**

In 1998, a three year research programme focusing on ethnic minorities (EMs) in the UK Armed Forces (AFs) was initiated at the Defence Evaluation Research Agency Centre for Human Sciences (DERA CHS)[1]. The programme of work is funded by Technology Group 5 (Human Sciences and Synthetic Environments) of the MoD's Corporate Research Programme. Supporting ethnic minorities is a key issue for all three Services and in recent years has been recognised as a priority issue. As a starting point to this three year work programme, DERA CHS held a workshop in May 1998 to identify the concerns and issues relating to the recruitment, selection and retention of EMs in the AFs and to identify future research initiatives.

To provide some context to this work, the AFs have been subject to recent claims of racism, with episodes of bullying and harassment being reported in the press. One example being the Household Cavalry which was investigated following claims of racial discrimination in 1995. Such claims have resulted in poor media coverage and negative perceptions of the AFs. The AFs have experienced difficulty attracting larger percentages of EM applicants. Currently, as a whole the AFs are falling below recruiting targets for EMs.

The one day workshop was attended by 22 participants representing:

- Royal Air Force
- Royal Navy
- Army
- MoD Central Staff
- DERA

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All the participants were involved with equal opportunity issues in their current roles and were responsible for aspects such as marketing, recruitment, selection, manning, training, in-Service matters and retention. In addition to the participants, there were two facilitators from Kingston University who were experts in the methodology used during the workshop: Soft Systems Methodology. The participants were divided into 3 balanced syndicate groups for each stage of the analysis and then reconvened after each stage to discuss the results of the analysis.

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## Soft Systems Methodology

Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) was originally developed by Peter Checkland (Lancaster University, UK). It provides a systemic approach to problem solving and can be used to identify the human and social issues associated with a particular issue or problem in an organisation. The methodology also allows beliefs and views to be challenged and may enable organisational change. The methodology can be applied to a wide range of problems and organisations and was chosen to provide an alternative approach to the issue and for its flexibility.

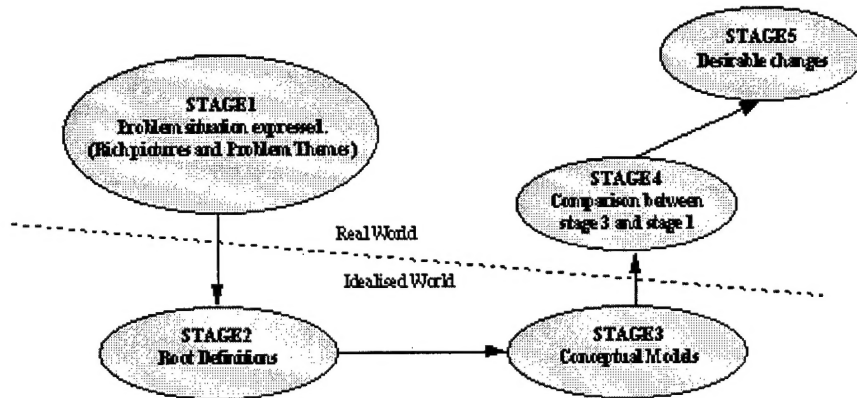


Figure 1: SSM Stages

The participants were introduced to a variant of Checkland's Soft Systems Methodology which is shown in Figure 1 (Checkland, 1981 and Checkland and Scholes, 1990). The process of Soft Systems Analysis (SSA) begins with achieving an overall understanding of the situation under investigation. The following stages are then completed:

- identifying the perceived problems;
- deciding what systems will best address these problems;
- building pictorial models of the activities involved;
- comparing these activities with what happens in reality in order to determine where the differences and key discrepancies lie and hence identifying possible changes;
- establishing what changes to the existing situation can be put into place.

### The Stages of Soft Systems Methodology (SSM)

**Stage 1: Problem situation expressed.** The first stage aims to capture the perceptions of the overall situation. The technique used is a diagrammatic representation called a

'rich picture'. The rich pictures represent the current situation and can include representations of factual information and subjective information such as emotions, hunches and feelings. They provide a holistic impression which a list of words or flow diagram may fail to capture. From the rich pictures a list of problems, such as task-oriented or people-oriented problems, is extracted.

**Stage 2: Root definitions.** From the broad list of problems the key problem areas are selected. For each key problem area a root definition (or statement) is produced which provides a description of the activities that ought to take place (in the ideal world) to eliminate the problem.

**Stage 3: Conceptual models.** For each root definition, a 'conceptual model' in the form of a set of linked activities is developed. These are those activities that logically ought to be in place in order for the system defined in the root definition to function.

**Stage 4: Comparison.** The conceptual model, an idealised set of activities, is compared with the real life situation as depicted in the rich pictures. The differences between the two are the potential changes that can be made to the situation. These may be changes to the structure of the organisation, the way in which its processes are carried out or the management of people.

**Stage 5: Desirable changes.** Not all the changes identified will be practicable or culturally feasible and each one is evaluated then accepted or rejected. The accepted changes form the key actions in a subsequent implementation plan.

### **Workshop Analysis and Outcomes**

In the first two sessions of the workshop, the three syndicate groups produced their rich pictures. Each group produced two rich pictures; one at a general level and one at a more specific level, focusing on a particular issue. The main problem themes that emerged from the groups' rich pictures are listed below.

- **Media:** acceptance/belief of advertisements, greater prominence of negative press coverage, impact of television dramatisations portraying racism in the AFs.
- **Cultural Difference:** understanding the nature of cultural differences, mismatch between military lifestyle and cultural needs.
- **Societal Influences:** peers, parents, teachers, trends, acceptability of joining the AFs.
- **Politics and Policies:** realism of recruiting targets. Question over whether there is real commitment to equal opportunities.
- **Perceptions, Image and Prejudice:** perceptions of EMs of the AFs and the AFs perceptions of EMs.
- **Identity:** Am I Welsh or Muslim? Impact of cultural, religious, national and regional identities and group belonging.
- **Educational background and entry requirements:** Bias in the selection system, tokenism vs. meritocracy.
- **Evaluation of policies:** Are actions, initiatives and policies effective?

The groups shared a number of common themes which centred around perceptions, image and marketing. There was less discussion of in-Service issues such as bullying, harassment, career progression and equal treatment.

The next stage of the analysis was to prepare root definitions. Extracts of the groups' root definitions are presented below:

"Investigate and identify the perceptions both of the those in the AFs towards EMs, and of EMs from all groups towards the AFs, and change them, in order to eliminate those factors which make the AFs unattractive to EMs, whilst still delivering maximum capability."

"The UK Armed Forces engaged in the defence of the Realm will recruit and select the appropriate number of individuals based on merit. . . and in doing so overcome religious, cultural and other barriers; we will establish public perception of the AFs as a career for visible ethnic minorities (VEM), identify perceived barriers, assess the extent of these, evaluate and plan."

“To conduct an audit of the existing EM climate internally and externally, with the defined EM target audiences, in order to develop an accurate and credible image and communicate this effectively to the target audience, which is then monitored internally and subject to external validation.”

These root definitions were then transformed into conceptual models of activities required to reduce the current problems relating to EM recruitment and retention. The main outcomes of the models were:

- a need to investigate the issues further;
- gain a better understanding of the target groups;
- set realistic targets, increase awareness of targets;
- audit the internal and external climate;
- communicate strategies through PR/marketing;
- reduce barriers (perceived or real);
- monitor actions and initiatives;
- and assess the impact of programmes, actions and initiatives;

The workshop concluded with a plenary session. In general, most of the participants found the methodology interesting and useful although there were some participants who remained cynical of the merits of Soft Systems methodology. With hindsight, a number of lessons were learned from the workshop:

- 1 day was insufficient time given the complexity of the topic;
- some participants may have had inaccurate expectations even though the aims of the workshop were clearly given before the workshop and on the day;
- the participants focused on image, perceptions and recruitment;
- in-Service problems were not discussed in detail;
- and there was little mention of in-Service bullying and harassment.

As a result of the workshop, the following areas for future research are being considered:

- a UK trial of the Military Equal Opportunities Climate Survey (MEOCS) produced by the Defence Equal Opportunities Management Institute (DEOMI);

- a longitudinal attitude survey of public perceptions of the AFs;
- an in-Service study of bullying, harassment and career progression of EMs;
- and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the AFs' equal opportunities training programmes and complaints procedures.

## References

Checkland, P. (1981) *Systems Thinking Systems Practice*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., Chichester, UK.

Checkland, P. and Scholes, J. (1990) *Soft Systems Methodology in Action*. John Wiley & Sons Ltd., Chichester, UK.

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[1] The DERA CHS is an agency of the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

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